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ABSTRACT

In order that college and university educators and administrators could design a strategy for dealing with rural student dropouts, this study reviewed existing research on rural students who drop out of higher education. Although some research challenges the relationship between persistence in college and rural/urban background, corroborated findings indicated that students from small high schools were more likely to drop out than students from large schools. Some social factors affecting the rural dropout rate are low economic status, low family expectations, and geographic isolation. Little research has been done on rural women students but that which has suggests that rural females may have greater needs than rural male students. Research on rural students' academic ability in higher education presents conflicting views. Non-academic factors, such as the transition from a rural community to a college community, may impact the rural student dropout rate. Although there is abundant research regarding dropout intervention techniques, little is available regarding rural student attrition. Providing specialized campus services for rural and small town students might be one answer. Results of this study strongly suggest the need for research validating causes of the high dropout rate of rural students and the need for research on intervention techniques. (PM)

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Higher Education Students From Rural Communities:

A Report on Dropping Out

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Introduction

Student attrition in higher education is a serious problem. The Carnegie Commission reported that the dropout rate nationally is close to sixty percent (Baker, 1977). At a time when many colleges and universities are confronted with lower enrollments, and are fiscally strapped, every student lost poses a threat to the well-being of the institution.

Research on rural and urban students in higher education revealed that rural students were more likely to drop out (Aylesworth & Bloom, 1976). However, given the apparent significance of rural students dropping out, little progress has been made in identifying causes and remedies. According to Aylesworth and Bloom (1976), this "educational handicap of rural Americans and the uncertainty about the fate of rural students in college," has not resulted in abundant research on the characteristics of rural and urban students, nor has it led to the identification of "special problems faced by the rural student" (p. 236). The intent of this study, then, was to review existing research on rural students who drop out of higher education. The findings could be used by college and university educators and administrators to design a strategy for dealing with rural student dropouts. Specifically, the researcher addressed the persistence of rural students in higher education, factors affecting the rural dropout rate, dropout intervention techniques, and recommendations regarding future research needs.

Persistence of Rural Students in Higher Education

A study of rural and urban students in Australian universities revealed that students from rural high schools were more vulnerable to failure (Miller, 1970). In Welsh schools, Dale and Miller (1972) discovered that:

> students from city schools make the best progress their first year at university, and those from schools in large towns of about 16,000 to 60,000 do worst, on average, while those from schools in smaller towns and villages fall between the two. (p. 157)

Schwarzweller (1976) studied the effect of demonstrated scholastic ability on educational ambition in three societies: Norway, Germany and the United States. His findings indicated that social class origin, such as coming from a rural environment, and schooling experience, were significant determinants of educational mobility.

Cope (1972) reported that a positive relationship existed between persistence in college and high school size. The study, conducted in the United States, found that students from small high schools were more likely to drop out of college than students from large high schools. Cope's findings were corroborated by Anderson (1974) and Aylesworth and Bloom (1976). Anderson's (1974) study revealed that students from high schools with less than twenty graduates a year were less likely to remain in college than students from larger high schools. Aylesworth and Bloom (1976) reported that "rural students have a lower survival rate than do urban students" (p. 240).

Some research does exist that challenges the relationship between persistence in college and rural/urban background. According to Downey (1980), there was no relationship between the size of high school a student graduted from and persistence rate. Also, few differences in performance existed between rural and metropolitan students. Lathrop (1960) produced statistical evidence supporting the lack of a direct relationship between the size of a high school and the completion of college. Lins, Abell and Hutchins (1966) reported similar findings.

Factors Affecting the Rural Dropout Rate

A number of factors were reported in the literature as causing rural students to drop out of colleges and universities. This section of the study presents those factors.

Social system. The social systems in small rural communities greatly impact the social behavior and performance of rural youth in higher education (Downey, 1980). Ackerson (1967) reported that the incentive to go to or remain in college is not as great in rural America. Approximately one-fourth (23.5%) of urban Americans twenty-five years of age or older "continued their education beyond high school, compared with only one-sixth (16.7%) of small town Americans" (Aylesworth & Bloom, 1976, p. 236). Among the factors contributing to this lack of incentive are: low economic status, low family expectations and geographic isolation (Aylesworth & Bloom, 1976; Downey, 1980; Edington, 1971).

Edington (1971) noted that rural young people do not see education as an answer to their problems. They have low self-esteem and feel helpless in conquering environmental handicaps. Rural youth perceive that they have few and limited options, and those options that do exist are consistent with their socio-economic background.

Several researchers reported that a relationship between ethnicity and educational aspirations existed. A significant linkage between these variables can be demonstrated when looking at the educational aspirations of Anglos, Mexican-Americans, and Native Americans. Anglos demonstrated the highest aspirations, Mexican-Americans were next, followed by Native Americans (Chu, 1980; Edington, Pettibone & Heldt, 1975; Kuvlesky & Edington, 1976). Larson (1975) studied Indian high school students in Montana and found that mothers and values played an important role in decision-making and educational aspirations.

The social environment of rural communities also influences the attitudes of high school students toward college. The impact is felt most by female students. Rural high school seniors tended to restrict their occupational preferences to traditional female pursuits (Cosby & Stevens, 1979). Dunne (1978) reported that rural women usually married early, and looked forward to working before and after marriage. Flora and Johnson (1978) and Chu (1980) found that "the majority of rural women still conform to the traditional norms concerning woman's proper place: in the home, with the children and supportive of the spouse's endeavors" (p. 179). Rural families usually provide sons the

opportunity for higher education first, even though daughters probably were academically superior (Psathas, 1968; Schwarzweller, 1976).

The rural Hispanic female was noted by Dunne (1979) to be in more conflict than other women. To leave the home would violate the wishes of her family, who viewed her role as staying home and helping with the younger children until she marries.

Little research has been carried out on rural women students but that which has suggests that rural females may have greater needs than rural male students (Chu, 1980; Dunne, 1979; Fagg, Brown, Farris, & Rhodes, 1982). Accompanying this lack of research is a lack of attention to the needs of rural females by educators (Clarenbach, 1977). One area especially in need of research stems from the findings of Schwarzweller (1976). His study of rural youth in the United States revealed that though girls are consistently ranked above boys academically, they are less competitive when it comes to pursuing higher education. In addition, the college environment provided little support for women students with problems (Baker, 1977).

Academic ability. Research on the academic capability of rural students in higher education presents conflicting views. One view sees rural students as academically inferior, while the other view holds that they perform at a comparable level to urban students. Hollaway, Beegle and Bryant (1960) found that residents from smaller communities achieve a lower level of educational attainment than students from urban areas.

Though the study does not draw a direct relationship between the level of educational attainment and poor academic performance, its findings were consistent with studies that did establish a relationship. One such study was conducted by Feller (1974), in which a rural/urban difference in college performance was found. The results of Feller's (1974) study revealed that the top achievers were urban, non-middle class and female, while the bottom third were rural, middle class and male.

The other view of rural student performance contends that rural students are not at a disadvantage when attending institutions of higher education. Although, the rural student's performance in college would most likely be characterized by frequent changes in major and greater insecurity regarding occupational views (Downey, 1980). A study at Kansas State University conducted by Hoyt (1959) drew the following conclusions:

1. No differences in academic potential were found from various size high schools.

2. The academic performance of students from different size high schools was very similar.

3. Students from smaller high schools received lower grades than would be predicted based on their ranked high school performance. (p. 353)

The results of a study by Aylesworth and Bloom (1976) reported that rural freshman are intellectually comparable to urban freshman. King (1963) found that despite the fact that rural students entered college

with lower potential, they achieved academic success at a level comparable to urban students.

High school preparation. Rural students' preparation in high school influences their performance in higher education (Downey, 1980). This is in part due to the limited access rural students have to course offerings. The problem associated with this lack of exposure to a broad-based curriculum is compounded by a lack of stimulation among peers (Anderson, 1974). Kleinfeld's (1978) study of Native Americans also found a relationship between academic skills acquired in high school and college success.

Non-academic factors. Non-academic factors may impact the rural student dropout rate. A lack of social and interpersonal interactions, as experienced in high school, could be one contributing factor (Downey, 1980). Anderson (1974) stated that:

> The student who faces difficulty in adjusting to college life, and who does not perceive the campus as a desirable setting, may withdraw from college rather than face a situation which to him is emotionally untenable (p. 192).

The transition from a rural community to a college community presents "a special set of stresses for students from rural backgrounds" (Aylesworth & Bloom, 1976 p. 236). A disproportionate number of rural college students suffer from depression. McLaughlin (1970) attributed this state of depression to the conflict between the campus environment and the rigid and highly religious background of many rural students.

Rural students are demographically and attitudinally distinguishable from urban students, and possess "many of the traits commonly associated with failure in an academic setting" (Aylesworth & Bloom, 1976 p. 240). Further:

> Rural freshman are frequently lonely, feel misunderstood, deal badly with new found freedoms, have difficulty negotiating the complex university administrative structure, and are dissatisfied with their academic experience. (p. 240)

The intellectual, social and cultural background of rural youth show greater discontinuity with the college environment than the background of urban youth (Kysar, 1966; Lane, 1960). One outlet for reducing this stress and alienation is apparently through the excessive use of alcohol and drugs. According to Aylesworth & Bloom (1976), "rural students who left school reported excessive use of alcohol and other drugs with significantly greater frequency than had urban students who left school" (p. 239).

Other factors. Other factors have been reported as contributing to the high rural student dropout rate. The level of education attained by the rural student's parents has been shown to correlate directly with the student's persistence in college (Downey, 1980). Feedback from rural students who dropped out of college indicated a general dissatisfaction with academic opportunities. Aylesworth and Bloom (1976) suggested that one reason for this dissatisfaction may be due to "the fact that rural students came to the university with sets of

academic goals different from those of urban students and found many of the courses in the freshman year unrelated to their goals" (p. 239).

Dropout Intervention Techniques

Abundant research exists on dropout intervention approaches and programs for college students in general. However, only a few studies reported on intervention techniques that could be used to reduce the attrition rate of rural students in higher education. If we believe that rural students have special needs, then it is important to look at intervention techniques that address those special needs. This section of the study reports on those approaches suggested for use with rural students. The exclusion of the general approaches does not mean that they are being dismissed. To the contrary, the recommendations section of this study encourages further research into the effectiveness of appropriate intervention tools in reducing the number of rural student dropouts.

Providing specialized campus services for special groups is not new in higher education. Handicap, developmental and veteran students are a few of the groups that receive special attention. Many of these service programs have been successful in attending to students' needs, often times enabling them to move through their programs of study expeditiously and successfully. Some of the special service programs have been responsible for lowering the attrition rate. Providing specialized campus services to meet the needs of rural and small town

students might be one answer to reducing the number of rural student dropouts.

Aylesworth and Bloom (1976) reported that though "rural students have more personal problems than do urban students both prior to and after entering college" (p. 241), they typically do not seek counseling. An outreach program that actively seeks out troubled rural students might be benefical. Aylesworth and Bloom (1976) suggested that such an outreach program might include:

1. monitoring career objectives
2. special course offerings
3. creating subenvironments
4. sensitizing student personnel staff to special needs of rural students
5. initiate special orientation programs
6. form peer groups
7. implement ombudsman program (p. 242)

For underprepared rural students enrolled in college, Kleinfeld (1978) asserts that these institutions must increase the quality of academic preparation. One example of this was reported by Smith (1980). As a result of Northern Kentucky University's open door policy, many small city and rural students enter the institution unprepared for college. To address the rural students' needs the University developed a Special Services for Disadvantaged Students/Developmental Studies Program. The objective of the program was to improv the students'

proficiency in basic skills prior to their assimilating into the regular university curriculum. Aylesworth & Bloom (1976) suggested that the following elements be included in an outreach student remediation program:.

1. decentralize services into residential settings
2. programs developing interpersonal skills
3. use counselors with rural backgrounds
4. train students to manage the university bureaucracy (p. 242)

As reported earlier, rural women have special educational needs and hardships. Due to their rural roots and rural ways, a great deal of cultural conflict exists, especially with respect to sex role, progress, technological advances and social structures. Chu (1980) exhorts rural educators and policy makers to "address the issue of potential cultural conflict thoughtfully in order to create positive change without destroying the essence of the rural way of life" (p. 12). One way to effect such change is through educational guidance and couseling programs. The National Advisory Council on Women's Educational Programs (NACWEP) stated that:

> Rural girls and women need far greater exposure than they now receive to non-sexist, non-traditional occupational/career guidance information. They also need increased opportunities to become acquainted with women actively engaged in occupations/professions, both traditional and non-traditional. . . Teachers and school counselors should be provided preservice and in-service training to make them aware of

> their own attitudes about both rural girls and women and the expectations which rural women and girls have. (Clarenbach, 1977, p. 15)

This approach was supported by Fagg, Brown, Farris & Rhodes (1982), when they stated that rural women need extra family support and guidance. The guidance could be provided by career education personnel in public schools. On the college level, "support personnel services should be directed toward career planning seminars for women" (Carney & Morgan, 1981, p. 423).

Recommendations

The results of this study strongly suggest the need for research validating the current cause(s) of the high dropout rate of rural students in higher education. Also shown to be needed is research on intervention techniques that can be employed to short circuit the rural student dropout trend. Specific recommendations include:

1. Firmly establish whether or not a relationship exists between academic ability and persistence in college. If a relationship is shown to exist, examine intervention approaches that would strengthen the rural student's scholastic performance. This might include efforts to bolster rural high school curriculums, and the development or expansion of basic skills remediation programs in colleges and universities.

2. Firmly establish whether or not a relationship exists between the rural student's social environment and persistence in college. If a relationship does exist, examine intervention approaches that would support a smooth transition from the rural environment to the college environment. Outreach programs that provide counseling and guidance services to rural students while they are still in high school, combined with on-campus support groups for rural students entering college, might prove to be successful intervenors.

Conclusion

College students from rural communities appear to be a greater dropout risk. The results of this study revealed that insufficient research has been conducted on the nature and cause(s) of this attrition. In addition, the results indicated that few intervention programs exist that specifically address the needs of the rural student. The recommendations, drawn from the findings of this study, suggest the need for extensive research to identify the salient causes of rural students dropping out of college. This should be followed by a careful analysis of intervention techniques and programs that have demonstrated effectiveness in reversing the spiraling trend in rural student dropouts.

To compensate for the loss of students in higher education, many colleges and universities have instituted recruitment programs. Instead of spending large amounts of money and time on recruiting new students, Astin (1975) suggests funneling resources and energy to reducing attrition. As a retention tool, this approach could very well be the most cost-effective recruitment program available. Administrators at colleges and universities with high numbers of rural students would be wise to explore this type of recruitment retention program.

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